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ABSTRACT

A study examined Ohio Even Start programs and their attempts to create integrated curricula within their programs. A survey was sent to all Even Start programs. Results indicated that: (1) most of the programs defined their integrated curricula in terms of the themes they designated as focal points (such as consumer skills, child discipline, childhood safety, and holidays); (2) most programs met regularly to plan and coordinate learning goals and activities; (3) obstacles included the large amount of time, planning, coordination, and materials required; (4) matching topics to families' needs and interests appeared to be the most important factor for success; and (5) most of the programs used informal evaluation measures that allowed the staff to employ their own observations of develop their own instruments. New and existing programs may find inspiration and useful and varied models for their own programs. The survey instrument is attached. (RS)

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CURRICULUM INTEGRATION IN EVEN START PROGRAMS

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CURRICULUM INTEGRATION IN EVEN START PROGRAMS

One of the hallmarks of constructivist literacy curricula -- curricula that is based on the idea that true learning is directed and developed from within each individual, not simply "poured in" from outside the learner -- is the notion of integration. Integration can take a variety of forms and serve a variety of purposes. The underlying rationale for integrating literacy curricula is the creation of a much more authentic and purposeful context for literacy learning. Through the various connections made with other people, resources, agencies, and contents learning is reinforced in multiple contexts.

In reality literacy is not a subject at all. Rather, it is a tool or instrument that we use to learn about and explore our worlds and the worlds of others. As such, literacy teaching and learning is more functional and effective when it is taught within the context of inquiry into other disciplines, when it used to address questions and needs of the learner, and when it is used to enrich the lives and provide pleasure for the learner. This is cross-disciplinary literacy integration.

Integration can also occur between agencies. When an Even Start program communicates and coordinates its curriculum with the local elementary school, early childhood center, or social service agency, the program is widening the scope of its curriculum and instruction, lessening the chance for duplication of efforts, and setting the stage for multiple opportunities for specific learning to be put into practice.

Another form of integration that is an essential part of all Even Start programs is across-age integration. By across-age integration we mean using literacy to make connection between persons of different age groups: parents and children, grandparents and children, etc. Even Start programs consciously attempt to take advantage of this form of integration because we know that early literacy learning is most effective when it includes the active, purposeful, and encouraging involvement of parents and other important adults in children's lives.

The purpose of this paper is to report on an investigation in which Ohio Even Start programs reported on their attempts to create integrated curricula within their programs. Earlier this year we sent to all Even Start programs a survey instrument in which we asked the programs to describe their experiences with integrated curriculum and the concerns they have about integration. This report summa-

rizes that investigation. (See appendix for a copy of the survey instrument.)

By identifying and describing ways in which various ES programs around the state integrate their curriculum, we hope that new and existing programs may find inspiration and useful and varied models for their own programs. This report does not attempt to judge or evaluate the actions or decisions of the programs that were contacted. Any attempt to draw evaluative conclusions about any individual or group of programs is inappropriate and goes beyond the scope, nature, and intent of this study.

DEFINITIONS AND RATIONALE FOR INTEGRATED CURRICULA

Before reporting the data from this study, we feel that a brief discussion of the nature and need for integrated curricula is in order. Despite the current popularity of integrated approaches to curricula development, many professionals may not have a thorough understanding of the concept.

In the real world, the world outside the classroom, literacy is a tool or instrument that helps people explore, understand, and negotiate their world. In effect, it does not have a specific content that has any extrinsic value (unless you are a linguist who studies the nature and content of language and literacy). Rather the value of literacy in lies in the opportunity it affords people to learn the content of other fields.

It is widely accepted that learning is most efficient and effective when it occurs in a natural and purposeful environment or context. Thus, science is best learned in an instructional environment in which students have opportunities to observe nature, to make and test hypotheses, and to conduct experiments. Music is best learned in a context of hearing and discussing musical compositions. Football is best learned in the context of playing the game. And literacy is best acquired in the context of using it for what it is intended -- to learn about the world.

In an integrated literacy curriculum, literacy learning and teaching are positioned in a context of learning about what is important to the learner. And, given a program such as Even Start, the things that are important to learners include issues such as effective parenting, helping children develop as learners, learning life skills, and gaining recognition of academic achievement. In Even Start, then, an integrated literacy curriculum is one in which learners use literacy (and authentic reading materials) to become more effective parents and teachers of their children, to

more effectively deal with life's problems, and to achieve academic credit and recognition. In a sense, integrated curricula allow learners to "kill two (or more) learning birds with one stone." In the process of learning a specific content, learners use their reading and writing skills and through that use, simultaneously improve their literacy skills.

Because of this notion of achieving multiple levels of learning through one activity, integrated curricula are, in theory, efficient. Research into whole language (integrated curricula) programs has demonstrated the promise of such approaches. Diane Stephens (1991, Research on Whole Language: Support for a New Curriculum, Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen Publishers) has reviewed several studies of whole language approaches to literacy learning and concludes that they are effective in promoting students' literacy learning, their attitudes toward reading and writing, and their ability and willingness to use reading and writing as a lifelong activity to achieve their goals. Other studies have also pointed to the outstanding potential of whole language, integrated curricula, and the use of authentic text materials for improving literacy instruction (see, for example, Julie DeCarlo, [1995], Perspectives in Whole Language, [Allyn and Bacon] for reports on the effectiveness of whole language instruction).

An integrated curriculum model holds much promise for programs like ES. But implementing such a model is no easy task, in part because of the variety of forms and purposes for integrated curricula, in part because of the novelty of this way of curriculum planning, and in part because instructors and parents may not be fully convinced of the value and utility of the approach. Results from the ES survey, which we provide below, may provide suggestions and support for those wishing to capitalize on this innovative and worthwhile way to teach and learn.

CONTENT OF INTEGRATED CURRICULA IN ES PROGRAMS

The first question we asked the ES programs was to describe the nature and content of their integrated curricula. Not surprisingly, most of the programs define their integrated curricula in terms of the themes they designated as focal points. Themes serve as a centerpiece or unifying anchor for curriculum development and the instructional process. By using themes the ES programs provide a focus on issues that are relevant to both adults and children, and allow both to employ their literacy skills to explore the theme with sufficient breadth and depth that the learner is satisfied that s/he has answered all her/his outstanding questions and concerns about the theme.

Among the themes chosen by the programs are the following: consumer skills; child discipline; childhood safety; stranger safety; health and drug prevention; summer safety; summer fun; holidays. These issues are relevant to parents and children and provide a natural incentive for learners to engage actively in learning about the topic and exploring the topic through literacy.

Around these themes planned activities are developed for learners to explore these topics while employing their literacy and other learning skills. Materials (especially children's books, magazine articles, and other types of informative printed text) and resources are identified, gathered, and integrated into the activities in order to augment the learning activities and provide a sense of authenticity to them as well.

Some programs identify more generic foci in what students explore and learn. These more general organizers include the following: hands on, sensorial experiences; Montessori education; home-made toys; large muscle play; current issues; problem solving. One potential difficulty with the more general foci is that parents may not make the connection between what they are doing in the name of learning to read and write more effectively and the relevance of the activities to their own lives or the lives of their children. And, as a result, the incentive to learn and engage in literacy may be diminished. In addition, when more generic foci are chosen, they are more likely to be staff chosen and directed, giving less ownership of the process to learners.

Planning

As you may surmise, the success of integrated curricula depends upon extensive planning on the part of the Even Start staff. Most programs reporting to this survey meet regularly (weekly) with several staff members planning and coordinating learning goals and activities. Staff members include parent educators, early childhood teachers, adult educators, family educators, and curriculum/resource specialists. Some programs include parents in the planning or see the need to involve parents and get their input.

One of the first steps in the planning process for most of the programs involves taking a look at the goals that were established and, if necessary, refining them to more accurately reflect the needs and interests of parents and children. Observation, interviews, and pretests are often used to help the Even Start staff more fully explicate the goals of the program and parents and children's readiness to deal with those goals.

Next, given this overview of the specific goals, the

staff works together to identify a theme that reflects the goals and interests. Particular attention is also paid to the time of year, upcoming events in the school or community, and the unique nature of the community itself when deciding upon a theme.

Once the theme is decided upon, the planning process moves quickly. Resources are identified to explore the theme. These include text materials for reading; nontext materials such as films, art supplies, and other media; and human resources/experts from the surrounding community. Text material can be found mainly in local and school libraries and may include stories and poetry for children and adults, magazine articles, and nonfiction books. However, information from government agencies and materials found in the homes of staff members are other well-used sources. In some cases, staff members develop their own supplemental materials.

Learning strategies are also inventoried for their use in exploring the theme. Reading methods such as KWL, semantic and story mapping, response journals, list making, and other approaches to literacy development are examined for their utility in the particular unit theme. (These and other learning strategies and activities are described in detail in A Handbook of Effective Instruction in Literacy [Rasinski and Padak] that was distributed previously to all ES programs in the state.)

The next step in the process of planning for instruction involves putting together the goals, materials, and instructional strategies as a sequence of coherent lessons or learning activities. For example, in the study of summer safety for children the plan may include a talk by a local police officer on traffic safety supplemented by a film for children and adults. Parents might later read and discuss among themselves the content of several magazine articles and pamphlets on traffic safety. These readings are supplemented with reading instructional strategies such as story mapping, list group label, and the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA). Adults later write their own personal responses to this reading and plan their own strategies for informing their children about playing it safe in traffic. Future lessons continue to develop the theme of summer safety for adults and children.

The final step in the planning process involves how teachers intend to evaluate students' progress in the unit. Again beginning with the goals, the Even Start staff plan ways to assess the extent to which the parents and children have achieved the goals set for the unit. Evaluation methods may include observation as well as interview and discussion. Evaluation may also include formal or informal testing, or it may involve analysis of parents' and children's

own response to the lessons.

Obstacles

As in any type of curriculum innovation there are obstacles, some anticipated, others not, that cause difficulties in the full and smooth curriculum implementation. This is particularly true of integrated curricula that are fundamentally different from standard isolated skills approaches to teaching and learning and that require considerable coordination and planning by members of diverse educational and occupational specialties.

Planning and coordination require large and specific commitments of staff time. Time is a major problem. As one ES director said, "There never seems to be enough time to do the things you want to do once you find them. Nor is there enough time to plan the curriculum."

Providing sufficient training so that staff understand integrated curriculum is also important. Having only a partial understanding of integrated curriculum can cause problems in planning because staff members are not sure of what they are to be doing. One project mentioned that its staff members did not have a good grasp of integrated curricula and were "wandering around trying to find their bearings." It wasn't until the April, 1994 ES conference that things began to click for staff members as they attended sessions on integrated curricula and talked with other groups who were working toward the same goal. ES directors need to plan for sufficient and ongoing staff development activities so that staff members understand the nature of and are able to plan, implement, and assess integrated curricula. It may also be helpful to recruit staff members with backgrounds in reading/elementary education since professionals in these specialties normally have some background and training in developing and implementing integrated curricula.

Start up problems can also provide obstacles. Not having a permanent location or having a location that is in the process of being readied can result in tentative planning that is neither bold nor integrated. Facilities need to be designed in such a way as to allow the planned learning activities to happen without being limited by the physical nature of the building or room. The safe thing to do when problems occur is to resort to what is known and familiar -- traditional curriculum in which learning objectives, parents, and children are treated in isolation. Unfortunately, this safe choice may yield less than optimal learning outcomes.

Coordination among staff members is critical. In implementing integrated curricula, it is important that

staff members be committed to the process from the outset and, even if they are not fully aware of the process of developing and implementing such curricula, that they understand its conceptual nature and are willing to try new ways to make learning easy and effective for students.

Materials can also pose a significant problem in the development of integrated curricula. Learning where to find materials is an initial problem that can be overcome with little difficulty. Finding materials that meet parents' diverse reading levels may be a more forbidding problem. The answer here may be to rewrite materials for less able readers or, perhaps more appropriately, to provide less able readers with greater levels of support so that they may be able to negotiate even the more challenging texts successfully.

Similarly, planning for age differences in children between siblings or between families can cause problems. What some children may find fun and enjoyable may not be the case for older or younger children. Again, the answer here is to offer different but complementary activities for children of various ages or to adapt one activity so that children of various ages may engage in it at different levels and thus find it rewarding and enjoyable. Mixed-age, small group activity, with groups engaging in different but related tasks, is another possible solution for this problem.

Because one lesson or activity sets the stage for future activities, attendance by ES clients is important. Spotty attendance by some parents and children can complicate the successful implementation of the program. Program planners need to develop ways to encourage parents and children to attend ES activities on a regular basis. Planning for basic needs such as transportation is one thing that can be done. Making sure that the integrated curricula match the needs and interests of clients is another. This is why involving parents in the planning process is so important. And, when attendance becomes a problem, finding out from parents why they are not attending may allow ES staff to modify the program to make it more attractive to parents.

Success Factors

We asked programs to identify what they felt were the key factors involved in any success they experienced with integrated curricula. Matching topics to families' needs and interests appears to be the most important factor for success. When parents see the value of a particular topic to be explored, they are more likely to engage themselves in the topic with interest and enthusiasm. Moreover, it is important for adults to have a good general understanding of

an integrated curricula approach and to know why they may not be working in a GED workbook.

Another success factor is taking the extra time in planning the integrated curricula. Going the "extra mile" to ensure that everything is thoroughly planned, that materials and resources are available, that activities are sequenced, that teachers understand the procedures, and that areas of responsibility for the curriculum are assigned will make it less likely that unforeseen problems occur and that the curriculum can be implemented as planned.

Anticipating the obstacles described earlier and planning for them will ensure that some of the more common and significant problems are addressed early in the program. More than one program mentioned how much extra time and planning helped them develop successful integrated curricula. Another mentioned experimenting early on with different modes of instruction and settling on an approach that worked and that everyone was comfortable with. Gaining support and cooperation from staff members within ES and from other complementary agencies was helpful to other programs.

Other programs mention the need for the cooperation and support of parents. Parents in one project knew early on that the integrated curriculum was new. Program staff asked for parents' support, patience, and cooperation as they worked their way through it. Parents responded positively and actually helped design a more effective program. Another program involves parents in the planning, especially the designation of topics. Along with this, the long term advertisement of topics to be explored in future weeks (e.g., CPR, home safety) attracts parents to the sessions.

Finally, the need to stick to it, even when it seems unlikely that the integrated curricula will be successful, was reported as a success factor by one program. With patience and persistence things begin to click: understanding of the program and the process becomes clearer, instruction becomes more effective, parents become more familiar with the program and respond positively, and the integrated curricula begins to work. This ES program advises others not to give up too early -- integrated curricula do work, they just take time and effort and a willingness to take risks in making learning effective and meaningful for parents and children.

Evaluation

Since integrated curricula are radically different ways of approaching learning and teaching, it is important that ES programs ensure that appropriate learning is occurring, that established goals are being accomplished, and that learners are frequently made aware of the progress they are

making. Several of the ES program responding to this survey discussed how they evaluated students' learning in their integrated curricula.

Not surprisingly, ES programs around the state employ a variety of evaluative methods. These include formal measures such as the TABE and the Denver early childhood screening instrument. One program uses pre and posttest measures to gauge progress made between test administrations.

Most of the programs, however, use more informal measures that allow ES staff to employ their own observations or develop their own instruments that more closely match the goals that have been set for their own programs. Observations of student participation, materials utilization, socialization, independence, and demonstrated interest during learning activities are some of the more common informal procedures. Complementing these observations have been documents such as anecdotal records, activity logs kept by teachers or parents, and periodic progress reports.

Learning artifacts, examples of actual student work, also play an important role in some of the programs. Journal entries, examples of student drawing or writing as well as parent writing samples, error and miscue documentation during reading, and retellings after reading are some of the artifacts that ES staff analyze to determine progress.

Staff-developed instruments, such as observation guides or skills checklists used while parents read to their children or children read alone, are important parts of some evaluation programs. Other informal instruments include surveys/questionnaires given to parents, children, school teachers and others that focus on various aspects of the ES mission and the particular goals for an ES program. These surveys ask informants to respond to issues such as literacy development, parent learning, child development, attendance and interest in learning activities, interest in particular themes explored in the program and their accompanying activities, parent involvement in school, and student self perceptions as reader and writer.

Although many of the programs expressed concern about their evaluation program and indicated they weren't sure they were moving in the right direction, we feel that the multiple methods approach used by many of the ES programs is the correct one. There is no one best way to assess progress in learning. There are many goals in any ES program; there are many potential informants about student progress, from the students themselves to ES staff to school teachers; and, there are many methods to assess any particular goal or gain information from any particular informant, from formal testing, to interview, to careful observation.

We feel that evaluation must begin with an overview of the goals established for each ES program. For each goal the ES program should attempt to identify key informants (people who can tell if such a goal is being achieved) and to develop diverse ways of gaining information from the informants. Although you will end up with many pieces of information, some of which may seem to be contradictory, the plethora of evidence or data should point to a firm conclusion as to whether the program is achieving a particular goal.

This is essentially a portfolio approach that several programs mentioned as their ideal form of evaluation. We feel that a portfolio approach provides a deeper and clearer answer to the question of goal attainment. Moreover, because the information provided through a portfolio approach is so diverse and in depth, such an approach gives programs information that enables formative decisions on how to make the program more effective. In effect, portfolio assessment helps ES programs fine tune their programs to better address the needs of their clients.

CONCLUSION

Integrated curricula are a rather radical departure from traditional piecemeal approaches to education. Integrated approaches attempt to teach literacy and other needed information processing skills in a functional context that allows learners to use these skills for real reasons -- to learn to be a better parent, to help a child prepare for school and reading, etc.

We are heartened by the work done by several ES programs in Ohio to develop and implement integrated curricula. These approaches are a risk. They require more planning; there are no preexisting integrated curricula packages that can be purchased and implemented. They require ES programs to learn about their clients and their clients' needs and interests. They require extensive coordination between ES staff members and between ES and other agencies.

But the payoff is potentially great. While learning literacy skills students learn other important information to help them in their daily lives. Moreover, students (and teachers) learn that literacy is not an isolated skill in itself, but a tool or key that will open doors and opportunities for making a better and independent lives for themselves and their families.

Appendix

EVEN START SURVEY

INTEGRATING THE CURRICULUM

Program Location_____

Coordinator_____

Person completing form_____

At the recent Ohio Even Start convention in Columbus one of the major instructional concerns raised by participants dealt with integrating the curriculum. Because Even Start is a program that requires parents and children working together, an integrated curriculum that is relevant for both parents and children is most effective and efficient. Please respond to the following questions concerning your own program's use of an integrated curriculum. Return completed surveys in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. Thanks! Tim and Nancy

1. Please describe the nature and content of the integrated curricula you have used and the way you have used integrated curricula in your program.

2. How do you plan for your integrated units of study (How do you find your topics, where do you get materials, how do you determine appropriate learning activities/methods, how do you plan a sequence of lessons)?

3. What is or has been the major obstacle that inhibits the development of integrated curricula for your program?

4. If you have experienced success in your use of integrated curricula, what would you say has been the key factor in that success?

5. What methods do you use to evaluated students' learning (both parents and children) in an integrated curriculum?